Supervisor Piepho's opinion editorial on the County Budget 2005.

As citizens of Contra Costa County, we enjoy many public services. These range from police and fire support, to road maintenance, building inspection, code enforcement, park maintenance and family support programs. Many of us utilize these services on a daily basis.

Whether or not we are aware of the county's activities that are always encompassing us, in obvious and not so obvious ways, these services are quite costly, yet they should be available to us when needed.

The ugly reality of limited services due to increasing employee costs and the state raid on county coffers hits home to many residents and county departments when it comes time for the Board of Supervisors to take a hard look at our county budget.

The budget review process has been going on for several months now in an effort to communicate with labor folks, as well as the public, in great deal. Myself and my fellow colleagues have held numerous budget workshops in order to make well-informed decisions on critical issues. We have spent time listening, asking questions and evaluating the services each county department provides and the money it takes to support their efforts. And, most importantly, we have been diligent in our efforts to determine which services are critical to the daily health and safety of our communities.

There have been several proposals for addressing the serious financial predicament the county is in. The first proposal is to cut all programs across the board, in an effort to "equalize" the budget reduction process. The second option is to prioritize the services we provide to our residents, keep the services on the top of the list well funded and make cuts elsewhere.

While cuts across the board may sound like a fair solution to this problem, please take a moment to consider what critical services you want to be running at full capacity when you need them.

I believe that this county has a responsibility to provide each and every one of us with some basic services at their highest level, such as the Sheriff and Fire Departments which provide critical public safety services. I also believe the District's Attorney's office, which is charged to enforce the laws that keep us safe, should have the staff necessary to prosecute their load of felony cases. The Public Works Department is also a top priority for their development and maintenance of our county roadway infrastructure.

If we cut support and funding to these departments we create a deficiency in the core services the county is obligated and responsible to provide. We must maintain and protect public safety and make sure that police services are not only maintained, but restored, especially in our unincorporated areas of the county.

I want to make sure that when a crime has been committed, that the offender is brought to justice. And I have a vested interest in maintaining roadways, so that we can get to and from our homes, schools and work in a safe and timely fashion.

While I am very proud and supportive of the many outstanding services that this county provides, I have the task of maintaining those services that are critical to everyone's safety, while spending within our means. The Board of Supervisors is on track to meet our budget deadline July 1. We are making every attempt to have a smart financial plan; one that Contra Costa County residents can understand and live with over the next year and beyond.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank those of you that have been involved in this process and have written letter letting the Board of Supervisors know what services you value in your communities. We respect your input and concern for the places we call home. Enjoy your summer!